

## BOOK REVIEW

DAVID STUART. 2004. **Dangerous Gardens: The quest for plants to change our lives.** (ISBN 0-674-01104-X, hbk.). Harvard Press, Cambridge, MA (**Orders:** TriLiteral LLC, 100 Maple Ridge Dr., Cumberland, RI 02864-1769, U.S.A., 800-405-1619 <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/>). \$35.00, 208 pp., color drawings, color and b&w photo, bibliography, and index, 7 1/2" × 10 3/8".

Do poisonous plants and aphrodisiacs interest you? What about medicinal plants, life elixirs, and "mind expanding" plants? Then you should venture into the enjoyable new book called *Dangerous Gardens: The quest for plants to change our lives*.

Author David Stuart has created this intriguing text about mankind's use of plants to pursue health, happiness and long life. The book is divided into chapters that focus on different subject areas to which plants have been applied by humankind: "Great Afflictions," "The Vital Organs," "The Flight from Pain," "Chasing Venus," "The Killing Plants," "The Seven Ages of Man," "The Mind" and "Mysteries of the Gods." The author provides both historical background and historical reasoning regarding why plants were used for different illnesses or desires. For example, the book begins with a history of the plague and the various attempts to use plants as a cure. Other examples appear throughout the book regarding how plants were often being used for one reason and accidentally or eventually learned that the same plant actually cured other illnesses. Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), for example, in the 1600/1700s was used for wounds and lung ailments; not until the late 1700s was it learned that this same plant had dramatic effects on the heart. The text also describes many plants that were liberally used in history until their true and often-dangerous behavior was unearthed. One example is opium, which up until the late 1800s was used liberally as a cure for all kinds of ailments. The book contains many other interesting subject matter including the histories of famous poisoners, "cure-all" quack pills, plant use in rituals and the use of various plants as aphrodisiacs. The author also included information in various chapters on what he has labelled "shadow plants;" plants that are often used for treatment, such as purple coneflower (*Echinacea* spp.), but that science and/or the medical community has not determined the true benefit and risks, if any.

I found *Dangerous Gardens* hard to put down, it reads like a very good cable TV documentary on plant use by man, complete with photographs and/or drawings of the plants being discussed, practitioners of herbal medicine, perpetrators of poisoning, quackery, and many other historical images related to plant use. This book was insightful regarding the rationale that was used to decide which plants to use for different illnesses. It was fascinating to learn about how various plants were used differently throughout time. This book is recommended to anyone with an interest in the topic of plant use by mankind; it is easy to read and engaging.—Lee Luckeydoo, Herbarium, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, 509 Pecan Street, Fort Worth, TX 76102-4060, U.S.A.